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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE FEATURE RELEASE

For Release July 9, 1981

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343-5634

SCIENTISTS PLACE CAPTIVE-REARED FEMALE WHOOPING CRANE
IN WILD FLOCK; HOPE SHE WILL MATE

The first captive-reared whooping crane to be released into the wild is adjusting to her new environment--which includes a prospective mate--with apparent success, making U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists optimistic that another innovative means of propagating the endangered species has been found.

Like many a mail-order bride in the heyday of the frontier, the three-year-old female has travelled a long distance to begin a new life--from the Service's captive flock at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Washington, D.C. to the remote Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho.

Scientists hope she will mate with a male whooper hatched at Grays Lake in 1975, the first year of a continuing cross-fostering program in which sandhill cranes serve as surrogate parents. The young whoopers learn a migration route from the sandhills, a critical step in establishing a second wild flock of whooping cranes. The female crane's successful adaptation to the wild would encourage scientists who seek solutions to the shortage of females at Grays Lake, a problem that has slowed population growth. For unknown reasons, female cranes suffer a higher mortality rate than males in the first months of life.

Each step in the female whooper's progress from her Patuxent pen to the Idaho wilderness has been carefully monitored by researchers since this is the first attempt to release a captive-reared whooping crane into the wild.

"Whooping cranes mate for life, and they're very selective," said Dr. Scott Derrickson, who heads Patuxent's crane propagation program. "The disappearance during the last migration of two lone males and the failure of another to stake out a breeding territory left just one possible mate for the female."

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The behavior of the two young cranes so far has been encouraging to Service scientists at both Patuxent and the Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at the University of Idaho. When the female arrived at Grays Lake, she was placed in a pen next to the male's territory, so the two could become accustomed to each other without risking her safety. After retreating from her handlers, the female began to forage for food. The male immediately flew near the pen, and the two appraised each other. Within several days, he was spending considerable time close by, and the two were showing signs of bonding by synchronizing their everyday behavior, foraging and preening at the same time. Then the eager female began practicing the species' spectacular premating ritual dance, and the male responded with graceful leaps and swirls.

"There's no question of their mutual attraction," said Derrickson, though he cautioned that the real proof of the birds' pair bond is yet to come. A sturdy bond is shown by the distinctive dual calls for which the cranes are named, a duet composed of one note sounded by the male, followed by two staccato notes by the female. The two have begun calling to each other, but have not yet united in a duet. Meanwhile, the female has been released from her pen, since the male appeared disturbed by the barrier.

"We might have heard their 'unison call' by now if the male hadn't gotten sidetracked from courtship," said Derrickson. "Suddenly, for an unaccountable reason, he began to try to expand his territory in two directions at once. However, he keeps returning to the female's roost, and we think that when his wing feathers molt and he can't fly, he won't be this aggressive."

"If these whoopers form a bond, it's possible they could produce a chick as early as next spring," added Derrickson, who explained that females may become sexually mature at four years of age. The transplanted female is too young to breed this year, but is old enough to establish a lifetime pair bond. The male has shown his readiness for several years by his territorial behavior.

Should the whoopers fail to establish a bond before the fall migration, the female will be sent back to Patuxent, since she could not survive without an experienced mate to guide her to wintering grounds at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. This 870-mile migration route was imprinted on the male by his foster sandhill parents.

"We learned from an experiment last year that captive-reared sandhill cranes transplanted to the wild must integrate with the other birds to know when and where to migrate," emphasized Derrickson. "This principle applies to whooping cranes, and we hope this female represents the beginning of a new program to speed their reproduction."

Transplanting captive-reared females could be the newest in a number of successful techniques that have restored the whooping crane from a low of 15 in 1941 to this year's record number of nearly 100 birds in the wild and 24 in captivity. But, at the moment, scientists are listening for the raucous but welcome unison call that will signal the successful pairing of the two young cranes...and the prospect of new whoopers to come.

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